



Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia Inc

Research and Development in Higher Education: The Shape of Higher Education

Volume 39

Refereed papers from the
39th HERDSA Annual International Conference

4 -7 July 2016
Esplanade Hotel, Fremantle, Australia

Miles, D., Jones, P., Gopalkrishnan, N., Francis, A., Harris, N., Howard, E., King, J., Zuchowski, I., Dhephasadin, P., & Puthantharayil, G. (2016). Contested concepts of 'partnership' in international student exchange programs. In M. Davis & A. Goody (Eds.), *Research and Development in Higher Education: The Shape of Higher Education*, 39 (pp 202-211). Fremantle, Australia, 4 – 7 July 2016.

Published 2016 by the
Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc
PO Box 6106, Hammondville, NSW 2214, Australia
www.herdsa.org.au

ISSN 1441 001X
ISBN 978-0-908557-96-7

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Contested concepts of 'partnership' in international student exchange programs

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Internationalisation in social work practice and education has been the subject of significant debate for over two decades, with increasing importance placed on developing global perspectives. In part, this has been accomplished through the development of international social work student exchanges and international field placements. While there are compelling reasons as to why international exchanges and placements are undertaken, there are many aspects of these activities that are not adequately explored in the literature. Of particular interest is the concept of transnational partnerships and how these are developed and sustained in and through international student exchanges. For

example, many of the international exchange programs discussed in the social work literature are identified as unidirectional initiatives from the Global North, and the lack of reciprocity within their processes challenges the current conceptualisation of “exchange” and “partnership” in such contexts. This paper presents data collected from both Australian “source” universities, and institutions in the Asia Pacific which “host” Australian social work students on exchange or placement. Their perspectives on the nature of transnational partnerships in student exchange programs are described and the contested nature of “exchange” is explored.

Keywords: Social work, student exchange, partnerships

Introduction

Internationalisation is a current priority in higher education, with universities across the world promoting themselves as institutions that are both cognizant to and actively nurturing “the global reality within which learning takes place” (Bourne, 2011, p. 559). Australia is no exception to this trend with many Australian universities engaged in different facets of internationalisation practice, an emphasis reflected in the growing body of literature addressing this theme (Jones & Brown, 2007; Jones, Miles, Francis, & Rajeev, 2012; Parsons, 2010). The internationalisation agenda has also been a particular feature of social work education and practice for at least two decades as the importance of preparing social work graduates for practice in intercultural local and global contexts is accentuated (Nuttman-Schwartz & Berger, 2012). Enhancing student learning and competence in the international and intercultural dimensions of social work practice has been in part achieved through the development of international student exchanges and international field placements in many Schools of Social Work in Australia. Thirty Australian universities offer undergraduate and post-graduate social work programs (Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work, n.d.) and anecdotally, many of them engage in international student placements or exchanges (Bell & Anscombe, 2013). There is however limited academic literature that provides details about these activities and consequently, there is a significant lack of knowledge and scholarship about effective practice, curriculum integration and the constraints that may impact on programs and students involved in such internationalisation activities.

This paper presents some early outcomes of a major research project developed to respond to this perceived gap - *‘Going Places’ - International social work student exchange: Facilitating good practice in Australia and Asia Pacific*. This project is being undertaken by social work educators and researchers from James Cook University (Townsville & Cairns, Australia), in partnership with colleagues from the Queensland University of Technology (Brisbane, Australia) and international partners Nakhon Ratchasima Rajabhat University (Khorat, Thailand) and the De Paul Institute of Science and Technology (Kerala, India). The paper describes the methodological design of the project and presents preliminary findings which pose challenges to established concepts such as ‘exchange’ and ‘partnership’. These terms are used uncritically in both the literature examined for this project and in the government documentation linked to formal student exchange agreements. Data derived from interviews with Australian Schools of Social Work and the international hosts of Australian social work students on exchange are used to exemplify the contested nature of these concepts.

Context

Current government and university policies clearly reflect internationalisation priorities and the importance of student exchange in achieving internationalisation goals. In December 2013 the Australian Commonwealth Government launched the “New Colombo Plan” which outlined an approach to international higher education that aims to build transformational and deep relationships between individuals and institutions of Australia and the Indo-Pacific region (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2014). A genuine two-way flow of student exchange between Australia and Asia is the cornerstone of the policy aimed at ensuring Australian students are work-ready and connected to the region on graduation. This policy enhances the already integral place of internationalisation in Australian universities, where “strategic international engagement through collaborations, research... and student exchange is crucial for a healthy and productive university sector” (Universities Australia, 2011, p. 20). This explicit policy direction has had real impact with Australian universities being signatories to 8305 international agreements in 2014, almost double the number in 2003. While over half these agreements include student exchange, it is noteworthy that only 22% are with countries of the Indo-Pacific region (Universities Australia, 2014).

Research points to the potential of international student exchanges to enhance the abilities of students to work across cultures with those who hold different cultural assumptions (Gothard, Downey, & Gray, 2012; Grace et al., 2013) and to develop intercultural competence and global citizenship (Trede, Bowles and Bridges, 2013). Unsurprisingly then social work education is part of the push towards internationalisation, “driven by student diversity as well as by employer demand, the profession internationally, and by universities” (Grace et al., 2013, p. 121). As mentioned above, the development and delivery of international student exchanges and field education placements is one of the strategies used by social work education providers to respond to these diverse demands.

The processes involved in international student exchange raise significant issues for the social work profession and social work educators. For example, many of the international exchange programs discussed in the social work literature are identified as unidirectional initiatives from the Global North, and the lack of reciprocity within their design is a potential pitfall of student exchange programs (Gilin & Young, 2009; Nuttman-Schwartz & Berger, 2012). Razack (2002) in particular challenges the language of “exchange” in unilateral programs and claims such practices can reinforce colonial assumptions that only one side has something worth sharing, while Gray (2005, p. 235) suggests that these processes smack of “professional imperialism”. In the context of effective international field placements, Barraket et al. (2009) argue that partnerships with placement hosts must be built and maintained in ways that ensure benefits are mutual and placement hosts are consulted and included in areas such as curriculum design, assessment activities and research partnerships. The limited research that exists in this area suggests that at least some of these aspects are lacking in the processes of international social work student exchange (Alphonse, 2008; Razack, 2002; Gilin and Young, 2009). The ‘*Going Places*’ research project was developed to contribute to these goals through the exploration of internationalisation strategies in an uncharted discipline and context.

Project conception

The origins of the ‘*Going Places*’ project lie in the experiences of social work educators and researchers at James Cook University (JCU) in developing a range of internationalisation

initiatives within the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program. The social work program at JCU has an institutional mandate for the inclusion of such an international focus in the curriculum; this mandate has been enthusiastically pursued, in collaboration with faculty from international partners, since 2010 and has resulted in a range of achievements (Jones et al., 2012). For example, student and faculty exchanges have occurred; jointly sponsored international conferences and workshops have been hosted; and a number of co-authored articles and books have been published (Zuchowski et al. 2015; Sebastian, Chindu & Jones, 2012; Jones, Miles, Francis & Rajeev, 2011). While these internationalisation activities have been successful, they have also raised significant issues for those involved, particularly around the nature of the partnerships developed and the concepts of equity and sustainability. As noted, there is concern expressed in the literature regarding the unidirectional flow of many student exchange processes, and the inequity of this situation is exacerbated when the additional responsibilities and practical burdens often placed on host institutions and organisations in the Global South are taken into account (Alphonse, 2008; Pawar, Hanna and Sheridan, 2004). Despite a commitment to ensure reciprocity in international activities, the experience at JCU was that this goal remained challenging and difficult to achieve.

In seeking to understand how other social work education providers were dealing with these issues, it became quickly apparent that there was a paucity of information documenting the approaches employed in international social work student exchanges in Australia and little in the way of critical analysis of these initiatives. Drawing on existing partnerships with universities in Thailand (Nakhon Ratchasima Rajabhat University) and India (De Paul Institute of Science and Technology) and with colleagues at the Queensland University of Technology (Brisbane), a decision was made to design an internationally collaborative research project that would seek to fill this gap in existing knowledge and practice. The project was successfully funded in 2014 for a period of two and half years by the Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT), reflecting project alignment with OLT objectives and priorities.

Specifically, the aim of the '*Going Places*' project is to document and analyse current practice, and to facilitate the development of guidelines, strategies and resources that improve practice, in the area of international student exchange in the discipline of social work. A detailed summary of existing arrangements and systems that facilitate international social work student exchange is being developed based on data collected from both Australian social work education providers and their international partners, with particular attention paid to core social work values of equity and sustainability.

Method

The approach adopted in this project is grounded in principles of collaboration and reciprocity, guided by critical social theory and post-colonial theories. The collaborative research approaches used in this project prioritise the participation of all stakeholders with the transformation of existing practices as a core aim (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The guiding framework of post-colonialism encourages a reflexive approach to the cultural legacies of colonialism and imperialism which can significantly impact on international partnerships (Razack, 2002; 2009).

The project was conducted through three distinct phases. Phase one involved gathering quantitative baseline data about the number and nature of international social work student exchange programs that operate in Australia. The second phase of the project involved

collecting in-depth qualitative data from staff in Australian Schools of Social Work experienced in international student exchange. Similar interviews were sought from staff in organisations and universities in South Asia, South-East Asia and Oceania regions. These areas were specifically chosen as they reflect both national and institutional priorities. The third phase of the project is yet to be completed and will involve facilitated group workshops with both Australian and international stakeholders with the aim of further exploring and refining the data derived from the first two phases and of contributing to the development of best practice resources.

Data collection

Pursuant to the project aims, the participants in all phases of the research represented as many of the stakeholders in international student exchange as was feasible. In the first phase of the project the heads of all social work programs in Australia (N=30) received an invitation to participate in an online survey aimed at collecting factual information about the schools' approach to international student exchange, student preparation, staff involvement and levels of reciprocity included in international activities. By the survey close in October 2015, twenty-seven schools of social work had participated in the survey, a response rate of 90%. Outcomes from the survey have been analysed and presented elsewhere, however the findings indicated that 75% of respondent Australian Schools of Social Work did offer some type of international experience to small cohorts of students, most often in the form of international field placements. Students were usually self-funded, in their final year of study and were most likely to travel to India, with areas of South East Asia also popular. Areas of the Pacific were less likely to host Australian students on exchange, though some universities had fostered important links in Oceania. Information gathered in this survey was used to identify Australian and international participants in the second phase of the project.

Phase two of the project involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews with strategically selected staff from 10 Australian social work programs. These ten programs were purposively selected based on the survey responses to allow an in depth exploration of the nature and practices of diverse programs. A cross section of universities was included based on size, location, experience in exchange, and diversity of international activities. The research team purposively selected programs to represent activity across most states of Australia as well as metropolitan and regional programs. Some of the programs included in the interviews had offered international exchange activities for many years and engaged with numerous host organisations in a number of different international locations. Other programs reported smaller international activities and concentrated in one area with one host institution.

Host institution respondents were selected in a similar manner reflecting the diversity of institutions engaged with Australian social work programs. Specific details and contact with host institutions were not sought in the survey; however details about the type of organisation and the country in which the host was located were sought. In some instances specific information was provided, but in most cases the research team made use of its international connections in each of the identified countries. In total, nine universities or non-government institutions were interviewed as hosts of Australian students in either short term exchange or field placement; four institutions were located in India and one in each of the following – Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Philippines, and Fiji. This broadly reflects the distribution of locations identified through the online survey.

Preliminary Findings

As discussed above, the *Going Places* research project explored a broad range of issues related to international social work student exchange. A preliminary, thematic exploration (Savin-Badin & Major, 2013) of data gathered in phase two of the project reveals some important insights into the nature of transnational partnerships and contested understandings of the concept of exchange between Australian universities and international host institutions. The following discussions focus on these aspects. Participants describe their commitment to student exchange and the costs and dilemmas involved in participating in international student exchange. Their experiences are presented here using the words of participants though identifying information is removed.

Resource intensive commitment

Both Australian and host institutions devote significant time and resources to developing and sustaining exchange partnerships. The following comments indicate the sort of human and financial resources required from both the students' home university in Australia and the organisation or institution in the host location.

This is an area where you need resources. You need people resources, you need financial resources to ensure that they work, and so just like we often struggle to get universities to understand social work placements and how resource-intensive they are, internationalising our programs and having exchange programs et cetera is resource-intensive. (Australian University)

So there's quite a big commitment in terms of the amount of staff [student exchange] requires, ...translation is a huge problem...We work within constraints, so we do the best we can in terms of local translation, so there's resource issues there, but also like transport out into the field, and the time to try and build that around other people's busy schedules, so there's human resource time, ...in the sense of supervision of people, ...it does require one of the managers to act as a key point of support. So that's another human resource, need. And then from a financial point of view you've got costs... accommodation ... transport costs. (Host non-government organisation, [NGO], Cambodia)

In addition to an acknowledgement of the resources required, both Australian universities and host institutions described the personal commitments required of individuals. The resource investment described above sits firmly in the social work department and often dependent on a small group of staff committed to the values and processes of exchange.

We had a student go to Nigeria this semester... it takes a number of months...I have to be satisfied that all the requirements are there in terms of supervision, liaison. .. I had to spend considerable time with her talking about cultural aspects, and what she's going to do and how she was going to do it in a practice setting, so that I was satisfied that she was going to cope, that there were mechanisms for her self-care, and that there were mechanisms for her to get assistance if she needed it...It's a lot more complex than if you had a student who was just placed locally. (Australian University)

This individual commitment to ensuring the success of international student exchange is also evident in the description of processes from host institutions.

Some agencies are reluctant to take foreign students ...The agencies do say that having foreign students requires more work... So sometimes I've had to do a kind of song and dance to give assurance that we'll be on top of it and lots of assurance in order to be able to get the student in. And a lot of it is really the cultural... oh, the dialogue, we have to do everything then in English and not all our staff can speak English and so then we have to translate for them We can only give them work that is English focused and what we need is somebody who can do X, Y, Z in the community and they can't and then we need to send somebody with them and so but the agency really has to adjust and do a lot of work...They've been reluctant even in the college to want to take on too many of the international students because it does require additional work and there's like no additional funds for that or additional money for that or anything of that nature. It's really just because you want to. (Host University, Philippines)

“Serious” partnerships

Student exchange programs are clearly understood as only one aspect of broad based authentic partnerships. Australian universities generally articulated a real commitment to developing relationships that were equitable and meaningful.

Our overall plan is to build the academic partnership with a view to both of us developing a broader international perspective on what we do and what we teach, so it fits within the context of wanting a broader approach to our academic program. (Australian University)

So we've really worked at developing a collaborative relationship, a shared relationship between the two universities, and we've tried to invest back in them as well so that it is not just us taking from them. (Australian University)

These commitments are clearly important as conversations with host organisations indicated they were acutely aware of the potential for random and unplanned ventures and strongly resist approaches from universities seeking exchanges not firmly anchored in genuine partnership commitments.

I think it's the ad hoc feeling of a certain time of year comes, you know that you're going to get a lot of CVs, and inquiries about student placements, and it's not helpful to have a feeling of universities having to... find the placements and we're running for time. We get profiles ... in an ad hoc way ... maybe this student can do this with no longer term vision of what we're going towards. (Host NGO, Vietnam)

We did have like a request from one school ... and all they wanted was a student to come in but they were not interested in the student having to meet any particular requirements and so we turned it down. We said, 'No, we can't take that kind of exchange. This is not just allowing a space for somebody to come in and kind of have their third world experience. We want them to be able to gain something from this experience and also to leave behind something. (Host University, Philippines)

“Is it really exchange?”

Significantly host institutions and organisations were all able to report instances where the rhetorical commitment to mutual genuine partnership did not eventuate and the outcome placed the relationship at risk. Most significantly hosts questioned the nature of exchange.

I find that in ending the exchange there was no exchange ...we did thank the students during our group supervision meeting but between the exchange partner and us, there was nothing. (Host University, Fiji)

We have a MoU, a memorandum agreement among our two universities in terms of resource and training and also in the student exchange as well... if the student from both sides want to do a placement - we have agreement to do that, but we at our university never send our student ...because it is quite expensive to send a student there—they don't provide any support to the student and if the student wants to come, they need to buy the air fare, they need to find a place, ...the accommodations by themselves. (Host University, Thailand)

I think the biggest limitation is not being able to have our students go to Australia and that's the part we think is a bit unfair because ...we have taken many of the [Australian] students but in terms of numbers, what we can send is very small in comparison and again, it's around cost. So that's the area that we think is a bit unfair. (Host University, Philippines)

The comments shared in this section have highlighted the importance of international student exchange being embedded in real partnerships which are only cultivated as a result of significant personal and financial investment by both parties. Of particular interest to this discussion is the critical assessment of the concept of exchange by host institutions despite effort on the part of Australian universities to foster equitable relationships.

Discussion

As indicated in earlier section of this paper, the findings presented here represent very preliminary understandings from a large project which promises to provide a comprehensive analysis of international student exchange in the discipline of social work. However in even these initial discussions some issues requiring thoughtful consideration are evident.

In introducing the New Colombo Plan the Australian government indicated the intent to establish student exchange to the Indo-Pacific Region as a “rite of passage” for Australian students (DFAT, 2014). Universities Australia promotes international student exchange as a core ingredient in the development of “global citizens, leaders and relationships”, prioritising international internships or exchange experiences as parts of typical university courses (Universities Australia, 2011). Despite this government and institutional rhetoric at the highest level, it is clear from the comments of the participants in this study that the responsibility for resourcing student exchange in many cases sits with individual disciplines and, all too often, individual academics. Appropriate resourcing is required if the aspirations apparent in the rhetoric are to be realised.

Alongside the significant, often un-noticed and unrewarded contributions of the Australian academic staff to international student exchange programs, is the distinctive and significant contribution of the staff and institutions which host Australian students. The comments above

provide evidence of the generous and caring support offered to students as well as the significant investment in student learning and development provided by host organisations and their staff. However as discussed earlier in this paper, the international student exchange literature is silent about host perspectives, and minimal in considering the contribution of host organisations to the quality of students' exchange experience. The absence of these voices is indicative of the "colonizing space" described by Nadia Razack (2009),

Critical attention is needed to understand how we teach global issues, how we introduce content on particular topics, how students interpret and integrate knowledge, whose voices are silenced and more importantly what gets discussed and what is erased. (p. 9)

Finally the findings presented above signal a discrepancy between host and source organisations about concepts of exchange. Despite the efforts of Australian universities to promote equitable relationships and ensure that student exchange processes reflect important social work values, the host institutions are acutely aware of the 'unilateral' nature of the exchanges in which they engage with Australian partners. They acknowledge the lack of resourcing but are not blind to the gloomy reality for the students of their own programs, the benefits and opportunities afforded through international student exchange are unlikely to be part of their experience. Consideration of this inequity, especially for social work programs, is paramount.

Conclusion

Within the broader push for the internationalisation of higher education, international student exchanges have emerged as an important tool for meeting the international agendas of governments, institutions and professions. This is certainly the case for social work education in Australia, where many schools of social work engage in such exchanges, particularly with host countries in the Indo-Pacific. This paper has discussed some preliminary outcomes of a major research project which aims to facilitate a national approach to international social work student exchange. While preliminary in nature, these findings indicate clearly there remains much to consider in the development of international student exchange programs that are fully integrated in a way which reflects the values of equity, sustainability and reciprocity.

Acknowledgements

Support for this project has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views in this project do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.

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